

Kurds in Iraq Hold Controversial Referendum on Independence

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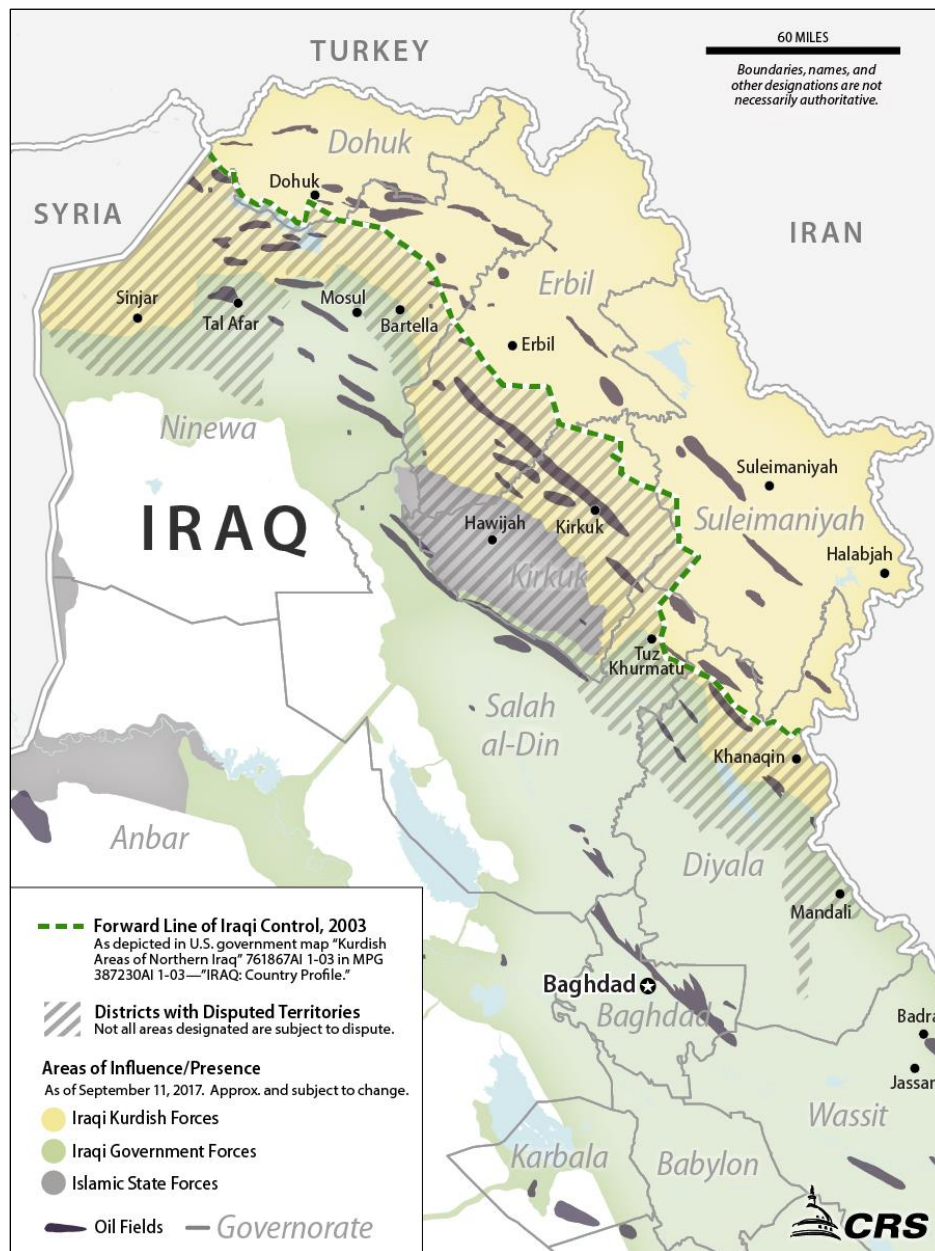
The question of self-determination for the [Kurds](#) of Iraq and neighboring Syria, Turkey, and Iran has remained unresolved since the delineation of national borders in the Middle East in the wake of World War I. U.S. intervention in Iraq since the 1990s has contributed to the emergence and protection of autonomous political institutions in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and the development of the region's economy and security forces. Today, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is recognized in Iraq's constitution and exercises devolved and shared powers. Kurds and other Iraqis differ among and between themselves over the desirability and feasibility of Kurdish independence, and some of Iraq's neighbors warily monitor related developments in light of the evolving aspirations of their own Kurdish citizens.

On June 7, 2017, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani [announced](#) that the KRG would hold an official advisory referendum on independence from Iraq on September 25. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi called the proposed referendum [unconstitutional](#) and requested that it be delayed or cancelled in favor of resolving KRG-Baghdad differences through dialogue. KRG President Barzani and other leading Kurds [described](#) the proposed referendum as an inherent right of the Kurdish people in pursuit of self-determination. They argue that dysfunction, extremism, and violence in Iraq threaten Kurdish interests and that arrangements for resolving differences under Iraq's 2005 constitution have not been respected, particularly with regard to disputed territories, energy, and fiscal matters.

The [United States government](#), other international [observers](#), and some of Iraq's neighbors also requested that Kurdish leaders delay or cancel the planned vote. Nevertheless, Kurdish leaders held the referendum on time and as planned. Participants were [asked](#)—"Do you want the Kurdistan region and the Kurdistan areas [disputed areas] outside the administration of Kurdistan region to become an independent state?" According to Kurdish [authorities](#), more than 72% of eligible voters participated and, of those votes deemed valid, roughly 92 percent were "Yes" votes and about 7 percent were "No" votes. Approximately 6 percent of votes cast were deemed invalid. Some observers [suggested](#) that those who chose not to participate, including some ethnic Arab and Turkmen, may have boycotted in opposition.

The vote took place across the KRI and in other areas currently under the control of Kurdish forces, including some areas subject to territorial disputes between the KRG and the national government such as the multiethnic city of Kirkuk, adjacent oil-rich areas, and parts of Ninewa governorate populated by religious and ethnic minorities (**Figure 1**). Kurdish forces have secured many of these areas since the Islamic State's rapid advance across northern Iraq in 2014. KRG leaders have said they intend to pursue separation negotiations with Baghdad, raising the potential stakes of territorial disputes and contributing to increased concern among Iraqi critics of the referendum.

Figure 1. Iraq: Disputed Territories
Areas of Influence/Presence as of September 11, 2017



Source: CRS using ESRI, United Nations OCHA, IHS Markit Conflict Monitor, and U.S. government data.

Notes: 'Districts with Disputed Territories' are districts and sub-districts identified in Article 2 of the draft constitution adopted by the Kurdistan National Assembly on June 24, 2009.

Iraq's national government has [reacted](#) swiftly, [moving](#) to reassert authority over border crossings and national airspace. A partial ban on international flights to and from the KRI was instituted, with some military and humanitarian flights exempted. Iraqi officials also have deployed government personnel to some land border crossings between the KRI and neighboring countries. Prime Minister Abadi [refuses](#) to negotiate on the basis of the referendum, and continues to describe it as unconstitutional. Kurdish officials have [decried](#) the measures, describing them as collective punishment and an attempt to institute a blockade of the KRI. [Turkey](#) and [Iran](#) have issued warnings and mobilized some military forces.

Iraqi national government leaders have considered their response to the referendum in the shadow of national legislative elections planned for early 2018. In the KRI, the referendum occurred amid [intra-](#)

[Kurdish disputes](#) over the legitimacy of President Barzani, whose extended term ended two years ago, and as plans for the reactivation of the KRG parliament and November 2017 KRG [elections](#) are under discussion.

U.S. Policy and Issues for Congress

Over time, tensions between Kurds in Iraq and Iraq's national government have complicated U.S. efforts to assist Iraqis in securing and stabilizing their country. Successive U.S. Administrations have used diplomacy and military partnership initiatives to lower the risk of conflict between Kurds and other Iraqis, with mixed results. Recent U.S. partnerships with Kurds in Iraq in efforts to combat the Islamic State have further enmeshed the United States in the question of Kurdish security and [relations](#) between the KRG and Baghdad. U.S. engagement has emphasized the importance of continued cooperation in the ongoing fight against the Islamic State and reiterated long-standing U.S. policy of respecting Iraq's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity. The Trump Administration has said it does not recognize the result of the referendum, called upon Baghdad not to use or threaten the use of force, and reiterated U.S. support for "a united, federal, democratic and prosperous Iraq."

Some Members of Congress remain vocal advocates for strengthening U.S. partnership with Iraqi Kurds, and [some](#) have called for U.S. endorsement of Kurdish self-determination (H.Res. 534). Appropriations and authorization legislation enacted since 2014 reflects broad congressional support for Kurdish autonomy and security as a constituent element of a unified Iraq. Congress has directed the provision of assistance to the KRG and for the relief of displaced persons in the KRI, and successive Administrations have provided such assistance with the permission of Iraq's national government.

The prospect of confrontation or conflict between Kurds and other Iraqis over the referendum and underlying disputes raises questions about Iraq's security and regional stability, about the durability of gains made against the Islamic State; and about future U.S. policy. If Iraqi national authorities seek to limit external assistance to the KRG, then the United States may face new choices about its security assistance, [arms sales](#), and stabilization programming, as well as its post-IS presence in Iraq. In addition to conducting regular oversight of U.S. diplomatic and military engagement in Iraq, Members of Congress may consider legislative options in the context of pending foreign assistance and defense appropriations and authorizations bills (H.R. 2810, H.R. 3354, S. 1780 and S. 1519).

Such options may include requiring regular executive branch reporting to Congress on political developments in Iraq, extending current or requiring new conditions-based certifications prior to the delivery of U.S. assistance to the government of Iraq and/or the KRG, or modifying the terms and levels of U.S. support to entities monitoring and helping to resolve intra-Iraqi [disputes](#), such as the [United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq](#).

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